

A Comparative Analysis of the Lexical Content: National Curriculum, Textbooks, and Student Text Production in Slovakia

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Abstract: Vocabulary represents one of the fundamental components influencing the development of linguistic activities and strategies, communicative competence, and thereby the overall acquisition of the target foreign language. As Laufer and Sim (1985) state, insufficient vocabulary knowledge is the biggest obstacle in understanding a foreign language, even more so than insufficient grammar knowledge. However, our previous research indicates significant differences between the Recommended Vocabulary, defined in the Innovated State Education Program (2015), foreign language textbooks prepared for the global market, and the final output, which is student text production. The aim of the presented article is to provide an overview analysis of vocabulary in the Innovated State Education Program, selected foreign language textbooks, and student text production at reference levels A2 to B2, and to highlight parallels and differences between them. The comparison of source materials was carried out through two functionalities of the Compleat Lexical Tutor lexical analysis toolkit, specifically through TextLex Compare and RANGE. The study's results reveal several issues that can help teachers strengthen vocabulary instruction of the target language in Slovak schools.

Keywords: Innovated State Education Program, student text production, foreign language textbooks, lexical analysis, digital tools

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Introduction

The issue of foreign language education is among the frequently discussed topics in the field of contemporary education. In the European context, the key document in the field of foreign language education is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (referred to as "CEFR"), which was developed between 1989 and 1996 and has served as the foundation for acquiring and verifying language competencies in the educational systems of European countries since its publication in 2001. Conceived with the intention of standardizing the fundamental principles of foreign language instruction and fostering the growth of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism among member nations, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) serves as the cornerstone for assessing and validating language

competencies within educational systems.

Within the 53 illustrative scales of the CEFR (2017), only two qualitative categories, i.e. "range" and "control," have been used to describe a student's knowledge and skills in the area of lexical competence. Lexical competence refers to a person's knowledge of the vocabulary of a particular language and their ability to use it. Lexical competence integrates lexical units and grammatical elements (*ibid.*, p. 114).

Initial materials related to CEFR's development tended to provide in-depth descriptions of linguistic lexicon in relation to language competence and performance at the six reference levels. At the B1 level, the publication 'Threshold' (Van Ek & Trim, 1991) recommended an extensive vocabulary encompassing both target languages, totalling approximately 2000 words. On the A2 level (originally Waystage), materials featured dictionaries (e.g., Van Ek, 1980) with around 1,000 lexical units. However, compiling vocabulary into predefined lists posed a significant drawback as it restricted the system's flexibility, potentially hampering its applicability in diverse language courses and academic programs (Weir, 2005). In Slovakia, this document exerted a notable influence on the development of domestic pedagogical documentation.

Slovak Pedagogical Documentation

Prior to 2008, vocabulary in state curriculum and related documents was primarily outlined by delineating thematic domains for various primary and secondary school grade levels. The State Educational Program (SEP, 2008) established specific vocabulary acquisition prerequisites and harmonized them with the criteria for language proficiency within the A1 - B2 range.

In the development of the mandatory vocabulary profile, the authors of SEP (2008) considered thematic relevance of the vocabulary, recognizing that in many cases, especially with less specific, general lexicon, there was overlap. They initially established basic thematic areas, comprising 21 topics and provided detailed specifications for these themes in alignment with the CEFR reference levels. These themes and subtopics applied to all foreign languages taught in schools, but the specific vocabulary within the profile was unique to each language.

The next step involved selecting basic vocabulary (A1 and A2 levels) and expanding it with more thematically and stylistically specific lexicon (for B1 and B2 levels). The lower levels served as the foundation for building vocabulary at higher levels (up to B2). The profile was not exhaustive, meaning it did not encompass all possible vocabulary inclusions. However, it served as a starting point for teaching and acquiring the vocabulary necessary for effective oral and written communication.

The Innovated State Educational Program (iSEP, 2015) builds upon the principles established in SEP but extended educational standards for the English language to the C1 level. Within the vocabulary framework, it modified the wording of certain thematic areas and subtopics and supplements vocabulary profiles for CEFR

levels A1 – B2. Additionally, the labelling of mandatory vocabulary was changed to recommended vocabulary.

Vocabulary Size and Frequency

Defining the number of words that students should acquire at each level presents a challenge for linguists, educators, and textbook authors. Various factors, including communicative intent (e.g. frequency, relevance), complicate the attainment of entirely reliable conclusions. According to Nation (2006), students require a vocabulary range of 8,000-9,000 lemmatized words to read diverse authentic texts, such as novels or newspapers in English, while a slightly smaller range of 6,000-7,000 words suffices for watching English-language movies. These estimates align closely with data from vocabulary range tests, such as the Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test (EVST) (Meara and Jones, 1990), which suggests that students possess the capacity to acquire a vocabulary ranging up to 10,000 lemmatized words. However, they would need to demonstrate mastery of 7,500 words or more to successfully complete a CEFR C2-level examination, such as the Cambridge Proficiency English (CPE) test.

Traditional foreign language education adheres to the principle that high-frequency words should be prioritized in instruction (e.g., Nation, 2013). Textbook creators tend to simplify the target language for learners by controlling the type of vocabulary to which students are exposed. Carter and McCarthy (1988, p. 159) advocate for frequency as the most appropriate measure of word utility, emphasizing the importance of high-frequency words that regularly appear in everyday language use.

The Role of Foreign Language Textbooks in Vocabulary Teaching

The dominant position of the English language stems from its global use in various sectors such as trade, education, healthcare, and more. The status of English as a global language explains why it is taught worldwide, leading to a global demand for educational materials. The largest producers of educational materials are major international publishing houses that strive to meet the demand in the global textbook market. In the realm of foreign language education in Slovakia, textbooks take center stage as the primary medium for conveying the target language to learners (Nunan, 1999). As a result, textbooks shape the selection and implementation of classroom activities, influencing pedagogical methods and the roles of students in the English language classes (Ur, 2012; Harmer, 2007).

Given the extensive range of English language learning materials, teachers and institutions face the challenging task of selecting appropriate materials. In academic settings, the adequacy of foreign language teaching materials is debated based on various criteria. The criterion of input and the presentation of vocabulary, often contextualized and accompanied by activities focused on word formation processes (Millar, 2016), is one of the most prominent. Discussions revolve around the suitability and appropriateness of topics (Reda, 2003), the presentation of words in context and out of context (Erten & Tekin, 2008), as well as the scope and frequency of vocabulary distributed in teaching materials.

Vocabulary and Communication Language Activities in Reading and Writing

Various theorists and researchers in the field of education have postulated a close connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension. This interdependence between target vocabulary and reading comprehension possesses a dual nature, influencing vocabulary proficiency and reading comprehension mutually (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000). Similarly, there exists a reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and communicative language activities in writing. In other words, the breadth and depth of vocabulary significantly impact writing, while, conversely, writing tasks contribute to vocabulary development. Receptive vocabulary is cultivated through an array of sources. Pichette, Serres, and Lafontaine (2012) suggest that composing written texts can enhance retention more effectively than reading, especially when sufficient time is allocated to each task. Consequently, language educators may incorporate writing assignments as a strategy to bolster the retention of new vocabulary.

In conclusion, the presented comprehensive theoretical framework encompasses the landscape of foreign language education, particularly within the context of Slovakia and emphasizes the pivotal role played by foreign language textbooks in the educational process and their critical importance for vocabulary learning, impacting reading comprehension and communicative writing activities. This theoretical foundation has laid the groundwork for the forthcoming empirical research, which will investigate the practical implications of these theoretical concepts. Specifically, the study will focus on comparing the vocabulary coverage in the state curriculum, selected textbooks, and students' written productions, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction in the Slovak educational context.

Method

By bridging theory and practice, this research intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of foreign language education and inform pedagogical approaches that facilitate more effective vocabulary acquisition and language proficiency among learners. In spite of the prevailing practice of assigning CEFR reference levels to textbooks by major international publishers, our prior research reveals a noteworthy anomaly. Specifically, the vocabulary within certain textbooks, particularly at the A1 and A2 levels, exceeds the expected level of proficiency, imposing a disproportionately high learning burden on students. This current study delves into the intricate landscape of vocabulary profiles within English textbooks employed in Slovak educational contexts.

Aims and Hypotheses

The primary aim of our study is to thoroughly examine the vocabulary profiles within English textbooks used in Slovak education, assesses the extent to which the vocabulary in these selected textbooks aligns with the vocabulary used by students in their written assignments, and evaluates the degree of congruence between the vocabulary found in foreign-language textbooks and the vocabulary stipulated in Slovak educational programme

(ISEP). In correspondence to the main aim, two objectives have been stated as follows:

1. To examine the degree of congruence between the vocabulary of foreign language textbooks and the vocabulary recommended in the Slovak National Curriculum (ISEP).
2. To analyse to what extent the vocabulary of the examined textbooks for individual levels is reflected in the vocabulary range used in specific written assignments in the research sample of students.

The operationalisation of variables identified in the aim and objectives led to developing two hypotheses:

1. The degree of congruence between the reference level of word families from foreign language textbooks and the reference level of word families from the ISEP will be negative.
2. The degree of congruence between the reference level of word families from foreign language textbooks and the reference level of word families from students' written assignments will be negative.

Our study meticulously explores the alignment between vocabulary in English textbooks and both the Slovak National Curriculum (ISEP) standards and students' written assignments. The outcomes of this investigation hold potential implications for curriculum development and pedagogical practices in Slovak education.

Research Sample

The research necessitated the segmentation of the research sample into three sets of data. The first dataset comprises corpora composed of texts extracted from two series of textbooks and workbooks for each of the reference levels A2 – B2, corresponding with the topics of written production samples. The examined textbooks included texts of various types. The datasets were compiled from the Project 5 and English Plus 3 textbooks at the A2 level. At level B1, all texts were drawn from the second edition of the Solutions series and the fourth edition of the New Headway series in the Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate versions. Analogously, at reference level B2, all texts were drawn from the Solutions series at the Upper-Intermediate level (2013) and the New Success series in the Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate versions (2012).

The educational standards for the English language at various educational levels, which are part of the Innovated State Educational Program, present a framework for developing communicative language activities and strategies and their implementation in diverse communication contexts. A portion of the educational standard focuses on the development of lexical competence and provides recommended word lists for each CEF level within the 21 topics. Based on this, the vocabulary corresponding to the specified themes of the content standard was examined and compared with other components of the research sample. Relevant sections with recommended vocabulary for reference levels A2 – B2 were selected from the pedagogical documentation in iSEP.

The final dataset consists of a corpus of written assignments. At the A2 level, two primary schools located in western Slovakia were engaged. The first primary school comprised two 9th-grade classes and provided a dataset of 15 texts, each of which tasked students with crafting an informal letter to a friend from England, while

also planning a prospective visit to Slovakia. The second primary school, featuring a single 9th-grade class consisting of 13 students, contributed a collection of 13 texts. Both of these institutions employ the fourth edition of the *Oxford Project* series as their primary educational resource.

Moving on to the measurement at the B1 and B2 reference levels, a comprehensive comparative analysis was conducted, encompassing 120 essays sourced from two additional institutions. The first, a grammar school, educates students at the B2 level, while the second, a secondary vocational school, imparts education at the B1 level. The grammar school opted for the *New Success* textbook series by Pearson for their English language instruction, whereas students at the secondary vocational school utilized two textbooks along with their corresponding workbooks from the second edition of the *Oxford Solutions* series throughout their four-year academic journey. Both secondary schools generously provided a compilation of 60 submissions drawn from the written internal segment of the school-leaving examination for the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19, marking the last academic years before the eruption of the pandemic. During the 2017/18 academic year, the written portion of the graduation examination was centred around the theme of Education, whereas the 2018/19 academic year witnessed both written examination tasks revolving around the theme of Sports.

Research Tools

A thorough exploration of the comparative lexical data obtained from three primary sources: the Innovated State Educational Program, textbooks, and student-written texts was conducted through a comparative analysis, facilitated by harnessing the capabilities of the Compleat Lexical Tutor tool, deploying both the TextLex Compare and RANGE functions. While TextLex Compare is primarily tailored for the differentiation and comparison of vocabulary in a pair of selected sources, the RANGE function allowed us to detect congruent vocabulary across all three sources. Moreover, the TextLex Compare analysis offered a detailed breakdown, including specifics on the number of unique word families and tokens, as well as a precise quantification of shared lexical elements."

Results

This study conducted a comparison of identified lexical resources across three types of examined sources, namely, the Innovated State Educational Program, textbooks, and student text productions. The aim of the analysis was to investigate the degree of concurrence in the occurrence of vocabulary within the mentioned documentation.

Analysis of Congruence in Textbook Vocabulary Compared to the Slovak Innovated State Educational Program (ISEP)

The table provides a clear representation of the congruence between the vocabulary from selected English

textbooks and the recommended vocabulary in the Slovak Innovated State Educational Program (ISEP). The textbooks examined were Project and English Plus at A2 level, Solutions and New Headway at B1 level, and Solutions and New Success at B2 level. The vocabulary congruence was measured using two metrics: word families (WF) and tokens, which were subsequently converted into percentages to offer a more comprehensible comparison.

At A2 level, the Project (PROJ) textbook contains 1,724 WF and 15,181 tokens. When aligned with the ISEP, it exhibits a congruence of 43.78% in terms of tokens. English Plus (EP) textbook contains 1,377 WF and 9,699 tokens. It shows a congruence of 42.72% in terms of tokens when compared to the ISEP. For the A2 level, both textbooks display a close alignment with the ISEP in terms of tokens, with Project showing a slightly higher congruence than English Plus by just over 1%.

At B1 level, Solutions (SOL) textbook contains 2,503 WF and 25,570 tokens. Its congruence with the ISEP is presented at 23.12% when measured by tokens. New Headway (NH) textbook contains 2,363 WF and 19,243 tokens. Its token-based congruence with the ISEP is 20.85%. At the B1 level, Solutions maintains a marginally higher congruence with the ISEP, surpassing New Headway by approximately 2.27%.

At B2 level, Solutions (SOL) textbook contains 2,582 WF and 20,526 tokens. Its congruence, based on tokens, with the ISEP is 20.56%. New Success (NS) Textbook contains 2,537 WF and 21,424 tokens. It exhibits a token-based congruence of 19.83% with the ISEP. For the B2 level, Solutions once again displays a slightly superior congruence with the ISEP in comparison to New Success, but by a relatively slim margin of 0.73%.

Table 1. Results of Measuring Lexical Congruence Between ISEP and Textbooks

Source	TEXTBOOKS		ISEP		CONGRUENCE			
	WF	Tokens	WF	Tokens	WF	WF%	Tokens	TOK%
A2 (PROJ)	1724	15181	662	1062	421	17,64%	7111	43,78%
A2 (EP)	1377	9699	662	1062	350	17,17%	4597	42,72%
B1 (SOL)	2503	25570	1166	2098	684	18,64%	6398	23,12%
B1 (NH)	2363	19243	1166	2098	652	18,48%	4449	20,85%
B2 (SOL)	2582	20526	1411	2109	588	14,73%	4653	20,56%
B2 (NS)	2537	21424	1411	2109	652	16,51%	4667	19,83%

Overall, the analysis indicates that while all the examined textbooks show a reasonable level of congruence with

the ISEP's recommended vocabulary, the degree of alignment varies. Project for the A2 level and Solutions for both B1 and B2 levels seem to have a marginally higher congruence when measured by tokens. These findings could be pivotal for educators in Slovakia when selecting textbooks that most closely adhere to the recommended vocabulary in the ISEP. Further research might delve into the implications of these congruences for students' language acquisition and proficiency outcomes.

Analysis of Congruence in Students' Production Vocabulary Compared to the Slovak Innovated State Educational Program (ISEP)

The data measuring congruence between the Recommended Vocabulary in ISEP and students' text production was tabulated in table 2. The table under review delineates the congruence between the vocabulary utilized by students in their essays, produced as either the study outcomes (at the level A2) or as part of the Maturita school-leaving exam across B1, and B2 levels, and the vocabulary recommended by the Slovak Innovated State Educational Program (ISEP).

For the A2 level, students produced essays that incorporated 718 word families and 4,855 tokens. When juxtaposed with the ISEP's recommended 662 word families and 1,062 tokens for this level, the congruence in terms of word families stands at 13.19% and 17.98% for tokens. This indicates that A2 students not only met but exceeded the recommended vocabulary in their essays, suggesting a commendable breadth in vocabulary at this level.

Transitioning to the B1 level, the essays showcased a vocabulary set consisting of 1,088 word families and 14,283 tokens. In comparison to the ISEP's recommendation of 1,166 word families and 2,098 tokens for B1, the congruence rates are 13.53% for word families and a notable 22.10% for tokens. The data here presents an interesting observation: while the students' usage of word families is closely aligned with the ISEP's recommendation, their token usage considerably surpasses the suggested benchmark.

Table 2. Results of Measuring Lexical Congruence Between ISEP and Students' Text Production

CEF Reference Levels	ISEP		TEXT PRODUCTION		CONGRUENCE			
	WF	Tokens	WF	Tokens	WF	WF%	Tokens	TOK%
A2	662	1062	718	4855	182	13,19%	1064	17,98%
B1	1166	2098	1088	14283	305	13,53%	3620	22,10%
B2	1411	2109	1230	14975	370	14,01%	3055	17,88%

Lastly, at the B2 level, the essays contained 1,230 word families and 14,975 tokens. Set against the ISEP's B2 recommendation of 1,411 word families and 2,109 tokens, the congruence stands at 14.01% for word families and 17.88% for tokens. Interestingly, despite students at B2 level producing a higher number of word families and tokens than their B1 counterparts, their congruence with ISEP's recommended vocabulary is slightly lesser, especially in terms of tokens.

The data manifests a consistent trend wherein students across all examined levels display a proficiency in vocabulary that either meets or surpasses the ISEP's recommendations. This could signify effective teaching methods, diligent student practices, or the Maturita school-leaving exam prompting a richer vocabulary usage. Future research might delve into the underlying reasons for these commendable results, ensuring the continual enhancement of language education.

Analysis of Congruence in Textbook Vocabulary Compared to the Vocabulary Contained in Students' Text Production

The table in consideration presents a comprehensive examination of vocabulary congruence between students' essays produced as assessment materials at A2 level and during the Maturita school-leaving exams across B1 and B2 levels, and the vocabulary found within selected English textbooks.

Starting with the A2 level, the Project textbook showcases a vocabulary comprised of 1,724 word families and 15,181 tokens. When this is juxtaposed against the students' essays, the congruence in terms of tokens is 26.79%. On the other hand, the English Plus textbook, which incorporates 1,377 word families and 9,699 tokens, exhibits a congruence of 26.19% when compared with the students' production. This suggests that students at the A2 level have a slightly higher alignment with the vocabulary of the Project textbook, albeit by a narrow margin of 0.6%.

Table 3. Results of Measuring Congruence of Textbook Lexis and Student Text Production Lexis

Source	TEXTBOOKS		TEXT PRODUCTION		CONGRUENCE			
	WF	Tokens	WF	Tokens	WF	WF%	Tokens	TOK%
A2 (PROJ)	1724	15181	718	4855	428	17,53%	5368	26,79%
A2 (EP)	1377	9699	718	4855	366	17,47%	3812	26,19%
B1 (SOL)	2503	25570	1088	14283	624	17,38%	12469	31,29%
B1 (NH)	2363	19243	1088	14283	573	16,60%	10344	30,85%

B2 (SOL)	2582	20526	1230	14975	820	21,51%	11483	32,35%
B2 (NS)	2537	21424	1230	14975	820	21,77%	11870	32,61%

Moving to the B1 level, the Solutions textbook contains 2,503 word families and 25,570 tokens. Its vocabulary congruence with the students' essays stands at 31.29% based on tokens. In comparison, the New Headway textbook, inclusive of 2,363 word families and 19,243 tokens, aligns with the students' production at a congruence of 30.85%. While the congruence difference is again minimal, it's evident that the Solutions textbook at B1 holds a slightly superior alignment with student essays by a difference of 0.44%.

Lastly, for the B2 level, the Solutions textbook demonstrates 2,582 word families and 20,526 tokens. When compared with student essays, the congruence is 32.35% in terms of tokens. The New Success textbook, on the other hand, with 2,537 word families and 21,424 tokens, reveals a congruence of 32.61%. Intriguingly, at the B2 level, the New Success textbook surpasses the Solutions textbook in congruence with the students' essays, albeit by a small margin of 0.26%.

While the differences in congruence percentages across the textbooks are minimal, they do offer valuable insights. These subtle variations could guide educators and curriculum developers in choosing textbooks that might best reflect the actual vocabulary usage of students, thereby enhancing the real-world relevance of language instruction.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide an in-depth insight into the alignment between the Revised State Educational Program, examined textbooks, and English text production by primary and secondary school students. The central methodology used for comparison was the TextLex Compare software, which precisely quantified the presence of vocabulary in extensive databases. The software's prowess in distinguishing between texts, sets of texts, or word indexes was pivotal in establishing the congruence of vocabulary across the analyzed materials. Word families and their corresponding tokens were the main units of measurement, ensuring uniformity in data evaluation.

In the initial analysis, the congruence between the Innovated State Educational Program and the examined textbooks was evaluated. The results were revealing. Despite exhaustive comparisons using the complete texts of selected samples, the alignment never exceeded 20%. This underscores a potential gap between the curriculum and the content that students access through their textbooks.

The subsequent comparison shifted its focus to the Innovated State Educational Program and the English text productions of students. Here, the congruence was found to be even more diminished, lying in a tight range of

13-14% for word families. Interestingly, when tokens were considered, values exceeded 20% at the B1 reference level. However, it's crucial to note that these figures exclusively represent the manifestations of identical word families and not the broader spectrum of vocabulary usage.

The final analysis evaluated the vocabulary congruence between student text production and the selected textbook materials. The methodology mirrored previous evaluations, aiming for thoroughness. The resulting data revealed congruence percentages ranging from 16% to 21%, with an average standing at 18%. This again accentuates the limited alignment between the productive vocabulary of students and the content they access.

Considering the breadth of analyzed samples and the nature of the Innovated State Educational Program, the findings offer a clear inference. The lexical concordance between the program and the examined textbooks is subpar. This confirms the verification of Hypothesis #1. Furthermore, the alignment between student text production and the textbooks is equally insufficient, verifying Hypothesis #2.

Challenges, such as limiting the number of processable characters in some functionalities of the Compleat Lexical Tutor program, affected the research process. In specific research phases, it necessitated working with extracted vocabulary lists over full texts, potentially impacting the breadth of analysis.

Conclusion

The research undertaken provides a critical evaluation of the vocabulary alignment across the Revised State Educational Program, textbooks, and student text productions within the Slovak educational context. The results highlight a significant gap in congruence, with insufficient lexical alignment across the analyzed materials. This disparity, underscored by the TextLex Compare software, raises concerns about the coherence of curriculum content with available educational resources and students' productive vocabulary.

Drawing from the theoretical framework, the inadequate alignment between the Revised State Educational Program and the textbooks indicates potential challenges in ensuring effective and consistent language education. This misalignment may affect the overall quality of language education and students' language proficiency levels.

Several limitations were encountered during the research. The Compleat Lexical Tutor program, for instance, posed challenges due to its character processing restrictions. These limitations necessitated adjustments in the research approach, such as relying on extracted vocabulary lists over complete texts.

In light of these findings, it's evident that the Slovak educational system requires recalibration. The data from this research can pave the way for harmonizing state documentation with textbooks. This harmonization will not only enhance the quality of language education but will also streamline the learning experience for students.

Lastly, the research offers avenues for further studies. There is a significant opportunity for a more granular profiling of vocabulary in existing textbooks. Such endeavors can empower educators in evaluating content quality and equip academicians in creating a national textbook that resonates with the curriculum.

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